

Classical mythology contorted

Helen Morales

From Marc Quinn's statue of Kate Moss as Siren to the characterization of Omar Little as a modern Achilles in the cult TV series *The Wire*, aspects of classical mythology are all around us. But do these modern renditions of classical myth bear any relation to their ancient predecessors? And can they tell us anything about how classical mythology worked – and still works – its magic?

Kate Moss: supermodel siren

Marc Quinn's solid gold, lifesize statue of supermodel Kate Moss is part of the British Museum's *Statuephilia* exhibition, showcasing the work of modern sculptors. As well as Quinn, who also made the statue of Alison Lapper formerly in Trafalgar Square, other artists include Damien Hirst and Anthony Gormley. Zip along quickly if you haven't yet seen it – it's on until 25th January. Quinn's statue of Kate Moss weighs 50 kg and is reckoned to be the largest gold statue to have been made in the world since the time of ancient Egypt. It cost £1.5 million to make (and will be auctioned for charity after the exhibition). What's striking, apart from the outrageous in-your-face bling of the artwork, is that it depicts Moss in a painfully contorted yoga pose, with her legs twisted so far behind her neck that it could give you a slipped disc just looking at it. It's entitled 'Siren'.

What is the statue saying to us? We should perhaps expect a Siren to be enigmatic. In antiquity they are often represented as bird women and their song was said to lure men to their deaths. Circe, in Homer's *Odyssey*, describes them to Odysseus:

First you will come to the Sirens, who bewitch every single man who comes to them. If anyone draws near to them in ignorance and hears the Sirens' voices, there is no home-coming for him, no wife and little children beaming at his side. Instead he's bewitched by the clear, sweet song of the Sirens, who sit in a meadow, surrounded by a great heap of rotting men – skeletons with shreds of shrivelling skin on them.

She then advises him to order his crew to

block up their ears with wax to avoid the Siren song, and to tie him fast to the ship's mast so that he can listen to the music without danger. The vase painting on p. 21 illustrates this scene. It's odd, isn't it, to have a statue or a painting of a Siren when the Siren story depends so much on the power of sound?

Identification with figures from myth

Kate Moss might be thought a good model for a Siren: she's edgy, has had brushes with the law, and is, above all, renowned for being one of the sexiest women of our generation. But the statue isn't just characterizing the Siren with the help of Kate Moss. It's also characterizing Moss through identification with the Siren. The association of a public figure with a mythological one was a common practice in antiquity too. The Roman emperor Commodus (above) styled himself as the hero Hercules as part of an aggressive PR campaign. But this was a strategy that easily went awry. If Commodus aimed to associate himself with the hero's might and bravery, writers at the time emphasized the emperor's cruelty and madness (both also features of Hercules) instead. I imagine Kate Moss prefers the sexy connotations of her identification with the Siren, rather than the suggestion that she presides over rotting corpses.

The malleability of myth

We might ponder that this particular myth, with its linking of female sexuality with death and destruction, is a tad misogynist. Indeed, many of the narratives of classical myth are misogynist and no wonder – they served the patriarchal societies that produced them. However, one important feature of myth is its malleability. Like

Moss's body, stories can be twisted and viewed from very different perspectives. This is why so many feminist poets and authors are attracted to classical myth: it gives them the opportunity to sing a different song. (And may I recommend Margaret Atwood's poem 'Siren Song' here...)

Quinn's statue invites us to reflect on all these things. The British Museum says it

will find fitting setting at the centre of the Nereid gallery, interacting with the great Greek beauties that surround it.

Classical myth is interactive. Myths gain their meanings through their interactions with other myths and with other versions of their own myths. This placement stresses the classicism of the statue – it is classical myth, like the Aphrodite over here and the Athena over there. At the same time, of course, the sheer goldness of the statue, gleaming unapologetically among the white marble, announces that this statue is far from our standard image of the classical.

Timeless and universal?

So is classical mythology universal? That's certainly one of the claims frequently made for myth: that its appeal lies in its timelessness. Well, yes and no. Often the narrative, the nuts and bolts of the story, will stay the same, but the significance of the story and its psychological importance to the community, will change (classical mythology involves both of these things: plot and significance).

Take the character Omar Little from the hit series *The Wire* (who Barack Obama says is his favourite character on TV). *The Wire* is about life in the Baltimore projects with its drug pushers, police officers, and politicians (and if you've never watched it, go and buy the DVD – it's the best thing on screen since *The Sopranos*). Omar (a criminal who steals money from drug dealers) is his own man, who lives by his own moral code. He stays apart from the crowd. He loves a young man. When his beloved is brutally killed and his corpse displayed as a spectacle and a message to Omar, he goes mad with rage and vows revenge.

Are you with me yet? Omar is a version of Achilles, the outstanding, antisocial star of Homer's *Iliad*. And just in case you didn't get it, an episode in Series 2 has Omar mention that he enjoys classical mythology (myth often is – and was – self-reflexive). Here, the bare bones of the narrative have stayed the same, but the psychological importance of the story has changed. In the *Iliad*, Achilles' narrative is used to explore what it means to be the best warrior, and whether glory is worth the sacrifices a warrior has to make to achieve it – all things that would have resonated with audiences in archaic Greece, but much less so, if at all, with audiences today. The Achillean narrative has other emphases in *The Wire*, primarily to explore what it is to live by a different and idiosyncratic moral code.

The gods, old and new

Perhaps the part of classical myths that translates the least well into modern times is the gods. The Olympians are stropky, petulant, and controlling. They may have their favourites but ancient gods rarely work towards the good of mankind, in the way that modern monotheistic religions imagine God as doing. Think of Aphrodite forcing Phaedra to fall in love with her stepson Hippolytus in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Or the gods in the *Iliad* behaving in trivial and childish ways as the humans suffer terribly. One of the hardest things for us to grasp about classical mythology is, I think, that the ancients didn't believe in the gods in the way that practitioners of modern religions tend to believe in their gods. Belief wasn't so much an issue: what was important was to honour the gods through ritual (whatever you felt about them) and to know your place as a mortal.

Do we have an equivalent, then, to the gods in ancient myth? In an interview in the August 2007 issue of the web publication, *The Believer*, David Simon, the creator of *The Wire*, suggests one answer:

...instead of the old gods, The Wire is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces. It's the police department, or the drug economy, or the political structures, or the school administration, or the macroeconomic forces that are throwing the lightning bolts and hitting people in the ass for no reason. In much of television, and in a good deal of our stage drama, individuals are often portrayed as rising above institutions to achieve catharsis. In this drama, the institutions always prove larger, and those characters with hubris enough to challenge the postmodern construct of American empire are invariably

mocked, marginalized, or crushed. Greek tragedy for the new millennium, so to speak.

A sobering thought, but perhaps a realistic one, that life is a rigged game and that we are controlled by institutions, much as ancient Greeks imagined they were controlled by the gods (but don't let that thought put you off applying to university). Whether or not we agree with David Simon, simply entering into the debate, thinking hard about how our world is different from antiquity, and how the stories we tell, and the statues we admire chime with those of old – doing all of this is part and parcel of the ongoing pleasures of classical mythology.

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